

HOME ON THE BORDER IN ANA CASTILLO'S *THE GUARDIANS*: THE COLONIAL MATRIX OF POWER, EPISTEMIC DISOBEDIENCE, AND DECOLONIAL LOVE

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ABSTRACT

After 9/11, more than ever in the history of the United States of America, security and domesticity have become paradoxical antonyms in racially and ethnically mixed areas, like that of the US-Mexican border. The borderland's history is further complicated by the issue of illegal immigration and its corollaries, such as strict border control and mass deportations of "aliens," as well as the rising crime rate. Even though it is protected by a fence and monitored by heavily armed border patrols, the area's notoriety for narcosmuggling, human trafficking and femicide keeps growing. Paradoxically, the more drastic the security measures used, the more dangerous the borderland becomes. In her 2007 novel *The Guardians*, Ana Castillo suggests that tighter control itself is responsible for criminalizing the border. Focusing on a Mexican American woman's search for her brother lost during an illegal crossing, the novel presents a complex dynamic between security and domesticity. The following article attempts to trace this dynamic through the epistemic lens of decolonial methodology.

RESUMEN

Después del 11-S, más que nunca antes en la historia de los Estados Unidos de América, la seguridad y la domesticidad se han

convertido en antónimos paradójicos en zonas de abundante mezcla racial y étnica como la frontera entre México y EE. UU. La historia de la zona fronteriza se ve complicada, además, por la cuestión de la inmigración ilegal y sus distintos corolarios, como por ejemplo el estricto control aduanero existente, las deportaciones en masa de “extranjeros” o el aumento de los índices de criminalidad. Incluso aunque se halle protegida por una valla y aunque esté monitorizada por patrullas fronterizas fuertemente armadas, la ya notoria reputación del área por el contrabando de drogas y personas, así como por el feminicidio, sigue empeorando. Paradójicamente, cuanto más drásticas son las medidas de seguridad empleadas, más peligrosa se vuelve la frontera. En su novela de 2007, *Guardianes de la frontera*, Ana Castillo sugiere que el recrudescimiento del control fronterizo es en sí responsable de la criminalización de la zona fronteriza. Centrándose en la historia de una mujer mexicano-estadounidense que busca a su hermano perdido durante un cruce ilegal de la frontera, la novela presenta una compleja dinámica entre seguridad y domesticidad. El presente artículo tiene como objeto explorar esta dinámica a través de la lente epistémica que ofrece la aplicación de una metodología decolonial.

Although born and raised in Chicago, Ana Castillo (b. 1953) currently lives in El Paso, Texas, a border city which lies at the intersection of three states: Texas, New Mexico, and Chihuahua. Across from El Paso, on the opposite side of the Río Grande River, lies its twin city: Ciudad Juárez. Along with Las Cruces, the two form a metropolitan area known as El Paso del Norte, or Pass of the North. Since mid-1500s it has been a major, and for the initial 300 years the only passage from Mexico City to the North American southwest. What in the past used to serve as a major corridor for trade between natives and colonial merchants still functions as an important passage to the north but in a dramatically reconfigured context, the principal cargo being drugs, weapons and, last but not least, undocumented aliens.

While El Paso has the reputation of one of the safest large cities in the United States, Juárez is its opposite. Since 1993 it has been associated with ongoing gendered violence; by 2012 there were already 370 confirmed cases of femicide committed in Ciudad Juárez, most of them unsolved to this day. In 2006, just before Ana Castillo's novel *The Guardians* came out, it became the epicenter of

Mexico's drug war¹ and quickly earned the reputation of the crime capital of the world. Interviewed on Fox News, Charlie Minn, an independent U.S. documentary filmmaker notable for his Juárez trilogy, said: "in 2010 there were more murders in Juárez than the 9/11 attacks. Since 2008, we have had over 10,000 murders in Juarez, which is 40 percent greater than both of our Middle East wars put together."

El Paso-Juárez, a major point of entry from Mexico to the U.S. and the second largest bi-national metropolitan area on the US-Mexican border, is also one of the most heavily patrolled border crossings. In 1993, Operation Hold the Line put 400 agents in the El Paso area, on a 20-mile stretch of the border, in an attempt to combat illegal immigration. Instead of discouraging would-be crossers, however, the militarization of the border has forced them to seek alternative, much more dangerous routes, like those across the Sonora desert. As a result, immigrant deaths have soared and human smuggling, according to *El Paso Time*, "is the second largest illicit activity in Mexico after drug trafficking" (L. Figueroa). Moreover, the high-security barrier between the US and Mexico, which started to be erected by the Bush administration in 2006 with the aim of containing crime, corruption, and illegal immigration, is often blamed for contributing to the escalation of violence rather than praised for the hoped-for enhancement of border security. On both sides of the border there are voices arguing for the dismantling of the fence and the legalization of drugs in the U.S. as steps necessary to stop the narcos' lethal turf rivalries and thus return some normalcy to the troubled region.²

It is there, in that problematic area, that Ana Castillo sets her 2007 novel *The Guardians*. The author recalls the moment when the idea for the novel was born:

I was hoping for "inspiration" from my new surroundings, the desert landscape of Southern New Mexico. One early morning while drinking coffee I contemplated the Franklin Mountains, which I can normally view from my house in the desert. [...] I began to wonder

¹ "The war began in Juárez around 2008, when the cartel based in Sinaloa, the marijuana- and opium-growing areas close to the Pacific Coast, moved in on the local organization, which controlled valuable smuggling routes. Since then, conflict has spread across much of Mexico's north, as various cartels, street gangs and crooked police units battle in a void of legitimate authority" (Rice).

² See, e.g., Chacón, and Casey and Watkins.

what it would be like to be a person trying to cross over those mountains to the U.S., during that freezing previous night and who might still be waiting for safe passage. There are any numbers of perils in such a crossing — from mountain lions to criminals preying on such poor people. A novel begins with a query. The query for me was not that first contemplation but what followed: What would it feel like to be a person on this U.S. waiting for a loved one who is attempting to cross over? (Wehbe-Herrera)

Not surprisingly, in his review of the novel, Sergio Troncoso, another creative writer from El Paso, claims that “Castillo’s most important accomplishment in *The Guardians* is to give a unique literary voice to questions about what makes up a ‘family,’ Mexican-American or otherwise, where an independent soul can find redemption, particularly in a hostile world.”

The novel, which Ana Castillo started writing in 2005 and published in 2007, captures the moment of Juárez’s dramatic transformation into the capital of crime and lawlessness. Its major protagonists live on the U.S. side of the border, but cross over to Juárez for a variety of reasons. All of them—the attractive Chicana widow Regina and her Mexican nephew Gabo, Regina’s Chicano sweetheart Miguel and his ex-wife Crucita, as well as Miguel’s grandfather, Abuelo Milton from Chihuahuita, El Paso’s old Mexican barrio—are catapulted into the city’s various undeclared wars because of either personal tragedies or the adoption of activist lifestyles. Despite the multiple processes of violence disrupting family life in the El Paso del Norte region, they struggle to maintain a semblance of domestic stabilities and protect their kin from danger.

Reading the border through the theoretical lens provided by decolonial criticism, this article will focus on the interplay between domesticity and insecurity in the El Paso-Juárez area as presented in Ana Castillo’s novel. In what follows I will first situate Chicanos/as within the modern/colonial matrix of power and theorize decolonial thinking and doing. Next, I will illustrate how those concepts resonate with the perspectives of the subalternized protagonists of *The Guardians* who struggle to overcome the Manichean reality of salvation for “ethnoclass Man” and damnation for the colonized. In their effort to put an end to what Maldonado-Torres calls the modern/colonial paradigm of war, the epistemically disobedient subjects attempt to reclaim agency, restore the logic of the gift, and build a better future for all in the open wound of the borderland.

COLONIALITY OF BEING AND DECOLONIAL/BORDER THINKING

In many important aspects, the US-Mexican borderland came into discursive prominence in 1987, with Gloria Anzaldúa's powerful theorization of that region as "una herida abierta [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (25). That wound, formed in the 16th century with the Spanish invasion and appropriation of the area identified with Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the Aztec people, has been kept open by a succession of insurrections, wars, rebellions and vigilante activities, lynching, race hatred, economic deprivation, glaring social injustices, ethnic and sexual oppression, forced deportations of non-Anglo inhabitants and, most recently, the "al-Qaedaizing" (Miller) of immigrants from south of the border. In "The Homeland, Aztlán," the opening essay from her collection *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa calls the inhabitants of the borderlands *los atravesados*. She explains with bitterness:

Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger. (16)

The "aliens" who cross the Rio Grande are stigmatized as subhuman on the basis of their racial characteristics. Paradoxically, as Anzaldúa reminds us, the southwest is the home of Chican@s, the historical descendants of the mestizo race born at the time of the *Conquista*, a race that has continued to propagate through intermarriage with Mexicans and North American Indians. It is this race that keeps returning home to Aztlán, claims Anzaldúa, only to find itself rejected by the Anglos who stole and appropriated a major part of the Mexican land: "Faceless, nameless, invisible, taunted with 'Hey cucaracho' (cockroach). Trembling with fear, yet filled with courage, a courage born of desperation. Barefoot and uneducated, Mexicans with hands like boot soles gather at night by the river where two worlds merge." Those few who make it past the border, however, become "[r]efugees in a homeland that does not want them"

(Anzaldúa 34). In this bitter reflection Anzaldúa puts her finger on a node of oppressions resulting from coloniality understood as an ongoing structure. Appropriation of land, racial profiling, intimidation, hate speech, poverty, invisibilization, classism—these are some of the classical manifestations of the modern/colonial paradigm of war, as will be demonstrated later.

To those whose family life, work, and everyday existence are disrupted by the artificially erected and heavily policed border, an attempt to “live *sin fronteras*” (Anzaldúa 217) seems the only viable survival tactic. To construct a home in such a politically contested and ethically problematic area, one must be ready to renounce the stagnation and timid security of gated communities and choose the calculated risk of freedom. *Los atravesados* cross lines, physical and metaphorical; they transcend divisions, challenge limitations, and dare to dream of a better, more just world in which life counts over profit. Castillo’s novel *The Guardians* opens with this dedication: “To all working for a world without borders and to all who dare to cross them.”

Despite the rather short-lived successes of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the American Southwest has remained a problematic homeland for non-Anglo residents and an openly hostile place for undocumented aliens. The failure of *El Movimiento* to bring about a permanent transformation of reality, and thus to heal the colonial wound, can be explained by recourse to Argentine semiotician and decolonial critic, Walter Mignolo’s claim that, operating as it does within Western epistemology and without questioning its assumptions, civil disobedience can merely lead to reforms, but never to the transformation of an unjust system (“Epistemic Disobedience” 15). To achieve that, to elevate life over profit and solidarity over competition, one must realize that coloniality is inseparable from modernity; that the very foundations of modern/colonial knowledge, laid out by white European males who held power at the dawn of the modern era, guarantee the perpetration of the epistemic, ontological, and economic privilege of the West and the continuing colonial and neocolonial exploitation of its “other”: the Third World, constructed as economically and epistemologically underdeveloped. In other words, the point of departure for a lasting transformation of society should be what Mignolo calls *epistemic* disobedience. An epistemologically

disobedient subject deconstructs the “hubris of the zero point”³ of Western epistemology: the illusion that knowledge constructed in one of the six modern languages⁴ by white-bodied subjects geographically located within the developed world (Sylvia Wynter uses the term “ethnaclass Man” [26])—is universally valid. It certainly is not valid for peoples occupying other geographical locations and inhabiting other-than-white bodies. Speaking from the midst of their lived experience, an experience formed by the racist gaze, epistemologically disobedient subjects question the colonial matrix of power which sustains the modern/colonial status quo. Mignolo explains that the colonial matrix of power is “a complex conceptual structure that guided actions in the domain of economy (exploitation of labor and appropriation of land/natural resources), authority (government, military forces), gender/sexuality and knowledge/subjectivity” (19). Shifting the geography of reason and foregrounding the living, experiencing body in the process of enunciation is synonymous with decolonial thinking.

Since the decolonial subject is located at the border of Western and non-Western knowledges and engages with the world from the places and historical experiences of her or his body (the Cartesian “I think therefore I am” is displaced by the formula “I am where I do and think,” Mignolo, *Darker Side* 78), decolonial thinking is necessarily a form of border thinking. José David Saldívar usefully reminds us that within Chicano/a Studies

pensamiento fronterizo emerges from the critical reflections of (undocumented) immigrants, migrants, *bracero/a* workers, refugees, *campesinos*, women, and children on the major structures of dominance and subordination of our times. Thus envisaged, *pensamiento fronterizo* is the name for a new geopolitically located thinking from the borderlands of Americanness and against the new imperialism of the USA. To think decolonially is to think from the borders of languages, religions, epistemologies; it is to think from what W.E.B. du Bois and Frantz Fanon theorized as double consciousness and Chicana writer and activist Gloria Anzaldúa called the consciousness of the *mestiza*. (339)

³ Expression coined by Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez.

⁴ I.e., languages spoken by the modern/colonial nations: Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, English, German, and French.

Thinking from non-western categories of thought—which implies detachment from the logic of western modernity—is a “necessary step for imagining and building democratic, just, and non-imperial/colonial societies” (Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience” 2).

The lived experience of the colonized, the Fanonian *damné*⁵ or condemned of the earth, is expressive of her coloniality of being. As argued by Nelson Maldonado-Torres, this experience is governed by the naturalization of the “non-ethics of war.” With the invention of race⁶ at the dawn of the modern/colonial era and the subsequent establishment of the colonial difference, the *damné*, relegated to the sub-human and sub-ontological category, started to be perceived as disposable—an obstacle to progress—therefore endlessly killable and rapeable. Maldonado-Torres explains:

War is the opposite of the an-archival relation of absolute responsibility for the Other that gives birth to human subjectivity. The obliteration of the trans-ontological⁷ takes the tendency of producing a world in which war becomes the norm rather than the exception. That is the basic meaning of the coloniality of being: the radical betrayal of the trans-ontological by the formation of a world in which the non-ethics of war become naturalized through the idea of race. The *damné* is the outcome of this process. Her agency needs to be defined by a consistent opposition to the paradigm of war and the promotion of a world oriented by ideals of human generosity and receptivity. This is the precise meaning of decolonization: restoration of the logic of the gift. (“On the Coloniality of Being” 260)

Castillo’s novel invites such a decolonial, interventionist reading. Epistemologically disobedient, the major characters of *The Guardians* persistently question the colonial matrix of power and build a literal and metaphorical home on the border, a viable

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, 1963.

⁶ In “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” Anibal Quijano explains that the idea of race was used to naturalize the relations of domination imposed by the Europeans on colonial peoples. “The idea of race is literally an invention. It has nothing to do with the biological structure of the human species. Regarding phenotypic traits, those that are obviously found in the genetic code of individuals and groups are in that specific sense biological. However, they have no relation to the subsystems and biological processes of the human organism, including those of the neurological and mental subsystems and their functions” (575).

⁷ Difference between Being and exteriority. The *damné* belongs to the sub-ontological, that is, it lies below Being and is therefore “negatively marked as dispensable as well as a target of rape and murder” (254).

alternative to the exploitative ways of the west. As they improvise lifestyles resistant to the “civilization of death” manifest in U.S. neocolonialism, the protagonists not infrequently fall back on folk wisdom and the cultural traditions of la Raza to root their existence in the communal rather than the individual, and to reestablish the good life as an alternative to modernity’s *techné*. All in all, they dismantle the non-ethics of war with their preoccupation with justice and a decolonial love politic,⁸ which Maldonado-Torres paraphrases as “the principle of receptive generosity” (“On the Coloniality of Being” 260). In his major publication, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*, the critic elaborates on this notion. The *damné*, he writes,

“cries out in horror” in the face of the [...] modern/colonial “death-world” and aspires—through the decolonial praxis of love, [...], through an ethic of the liberation of life [...], and through a decolonizing and liberatory politics inspired by the “decolonial attitude”—to create a transmodern world “in which many worlds fit” and where the global dictatorship of capital, property, and coloniality no longer reign. (244)

The four narrators in the Castillo novel depict their world as one in which war has become the norm rather than the exception; still, they refuse to accept the war as normative. Affirming love and absolute responsibility for the Other, they annul the sub-ontological difference that keeps the *damnés* in the hell of coloniality and overcome the binaries that make wars possible. Castillo’s Xicanista/o and Anzaldúa’s new mestiza/o, vested in the protagonists of *The Guardians*, emerge as decolonial philosophers in the sense that Maldonado-Torres gives to this concept: they improvise ways of thinking and doing that “promote open and embodied human interrelationality.” For this very reason “decoloniality can be understood as first philosophy: it is the effort to restore love and understanding” (“Outline” 22).

⁸ Decolonial critic Chela Sandoval develops the idea of “decolonial love” as a technology for social and political transformation; she defines decolonial love as “a shared practice of hermeneutics of love in the postmodern world” (4).

THE NEW MESTIZA AND THE WORLD OF THE YOU: REGINA

Regina, a 50-year-old Chicana, lives in a small house bordering the desert, a position strongly suggestive of the novel's border epistemology. Since Regina is the novel's main center of consciousness, the geo-political location of her *casita* is symbolic of the novel's site of enunciation. Like the other three (Gabo, Miguel, and Abuelo Milton) narrators who also speak from their specific ontological and epistemological borders, Regina delinks from the modern/colonial cosmology of the Western world and offers valid decolonial readings of the American Dream, an ideal Castillo once called "a WASP male philosophy on which this country was founded at the expense of third world labor" (*Massacre* 31). As the novel opens, this strong and resourceful woman is taking care of her teenage nephew Gabo while they are both awaiting the long-overdue arrival of Rafa (Rafael), the boy's father, revolutionary and experienced border crosser who repeatedly risks his life on the formidable desert to earn a livelihood for his Mexican family by working as a migrant field hand. On their way, illegal immigrants like Rafa must face perils ranging from dishonest coyotes abandoning their charges in the desert to die of dehydration, to drug gangs and the police fighting each other (or cooperating with each other) in the no-man's zone, to patriotic vigilantes all-too willing to help Border Patrol in enforcing safety, to organ harvesters like those that killed Gabo's mother and sister during one of the family's crossings. Waiting for Rafa to turn up and struggling with misgivings, Regina tries to provide the traumatized boy with the safety of home.

She appreciates Gabo's presence in her solitary life. After thirty years of widowhood, Regina feels a need to have a family and works hard on providing Gabo with the stabilities of home life. With her teacher's aide's salary augmented by her deceased husband's army benefits and occasional get-rich-quick schemes which sooner or later misfire, Regina dreams of settling Gabo's immigrant status and putting him through college, hoping that Rafa, once he arrives, would understand that this arrangement holds a better future for the son of a migrant fieldworker.

Although she lives in an economically developed country, Regina belongs to a historically colonized people. In her personal life she has experienced poverty, racism, classism, and neocolonial exploitation as a field worker. Despite the protection offered by her American citizenship and her homeowner/teacher's aide status, she

is still close to the *damnés* who live in perpetual hell, either in the person of her migrant Mexican brother, her nearly-orphaned nephew with no naturalization papers, the neglected baby of the teenage mother and gang member Tiny Tears, or the anonymous, exploited and weary field laborer from “el otro lado” she encounters in her search for Rafa. Like every colonized subject, Regina experiences various forms of oppression and dispossession, even though under modernity/coloniality discriminatory practices are usually sublimated “through the logic of the market and of modern nation-states” (Maldonado-Torres, “Outline” 17). Thus, for example, her involuntary simplicity is a far cry from the fashionable minimalist lifestyles popular among the wealthy elites. If she grows most of her food in her garden, it is because she is poor and not because she has gone green. It is for the same reason that she uses organic pesticides and fertilizers or that she recycles food. To survive, she must not only grow food and cook meals at home, but also try to sell the surplus at a small profit and economize on necessities.

But the logic of the market, made more global by the newly signed NAFTA (which came into effect in 1994), affects much more than individual consumers. The crop dusters spraying pesticides on the nearby farmlands threaten not only the organic quality of Regina's garden crops. On the poisoned fields work exploited immigrants, most of them Mexican *atravesados*, pushed off their own lands by corporate businesses. The free flow of goods across the border—mostly from south to north—under the North American Free Trade Agreement was accompanied by a boost in the illegal flow of disenfranchised bodies in the opposite direction, bodies desperate enough to accept conditions of virtual slavery for the privilege of harvesting pecans, chili, and other local crops for ten long hours a day.

Regina knows how it feels to go without rest or water, save for the two ten-minute breaks the farmers allow. Before she got her naturalization papers, she, the daughter of a Tarahumara Indian mother, was a seasonal field worker herself. Recollecting her and her family's life as they followed the chili harvest and thinking about the dangers contemporary Mexicans must navigate to get across the border to the U.S. she decides borders are unnatural. “From the beginning of time,” she muses, “the human being, just like all nature, has migrated where it could survive. Trying to stop it means one thing only for the species: death” (118). Masked by the rhetoric of freedom, economic agreements like NAFTA strengthen divisions

rather than abolish them. They deepen the ontological divide between ethnoclass Man and the *damnés*, because they are part of the modern/colonial steep. Situated on the underside of modernity, Regina learned early the lesson of Gloria Anzaldúa: in the borderland, where the colonial difference holds fast, “rigidity means death” (Anzaldúa 101). Holding on to received (colonized) knowledge and accepting the dualistic thinking that creates and maintains the colonial difference also means death. Maldonado-Torres’s assertion that “the *damnés* are the subjects that are located out of human space and time” (“Outline” 21) explains why divisions and borders are essential to modernity/coloniality: they produce zones of humanity and sub-humanity. “The zone of sub-humanity is the zone of endless war” (“Outline” 13)

In an aggressively individualistic Anglo society, a society that valorizes competition and material acquisitiveness, Regina sympathizes with a counter-ethos, one grounded in the communal and spiritual traditions of her Mexic Amerindian background. Embodying the resistant, untamed feminine principle unsubordinated by the patriarchal god of war and profit, she is irreducible to her economic value. In her essay collection *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo amply documents how—with the rise of patriarchy in pre-conquest Mexico and its intensification in capitalist societies—females, especially minority and mestiza females, became commodities definable by their economic value. Their duty is to “serve la patria when giving birth, producing labor and brain power for global corporations and fodder for the wars that protect their interests” (184). But Regina subverts the system of commoditization by virtue of her virginity and relative independence from the profit-oriented market: she is a mother who has never given birth to children and an industrious woman who refuses to feed the country’s wealth with her underpaid, slave labor. Instead, her awareness of shared oppressions enables her to make alliances with other victims of patriarchal-colonial dominance. Her healing presence and feminine care gradually reach beyond the immediate family and ethnic context, even to those who may be most difficult to love. The final proof comes when Regina forgives the despairing Tiny Tears for killing Gabo, Regina’s adopted son.

As her name suggests, Regina is the queen and goddess of the Mexican borderlands.⁹ On the one hand, her virginity and maternal

⁹ See Schemien.

care link her with the Virgin Mother of Christianity; on the other, her connection to the earth and her planting skills associate Regina with the earth goddess of the Mexica pantheon: she is Coatlicue, the Mother of All Life (Castillo, *Massacre* 106). Not surprisingly, she cares for all people, especially the most vulnerable, with a mother-like solicitude.

In *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo argues that spirituality is an essential component of Chicana identity. But it is not a “colonized” spirituality, a pure expression of religious dogmas. Mestiza spirituality is a borderland appropriation of apparently incompatible traditions in which the Chicana finds strength and confirms her self-worth. Disempowered by the patriarchy of the Catholic Church, she connects to the feminine principle embodied in the brown Virgin of Guadalupe and the suppressed goddesses of her Amerindian heritage, all of whom are aspects of one and the same “transcontinental earth mother” (110).

Regina's strength and her defiance of the power structures of white, Anglo-Saxon America and the patriarchal Church, her ability to adapt to a number of available niches, as well as her empathy and care for others make her a “new mestiza” whose advent was anticipated by Anzaldúa: like the new mestiza, she is a figure of inclusiveness and “tolerance for ambiguity” (Anzaldúa 101) and thus works towards the “uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness” (Anzaldúa 102). In Mignolo's terms, Regina/the new mestiza is epistemologically disobedient. Caught between the contradictory cultural codes, she refuses to be locked in dualisms. Taking the best she can from all the cultures that have formed her, she becomes an incarnation of a new race, a sum of several races and multiple beliefs. Anzaldúa prophesied that once it takes root, the new consciousness, the consciousness of the mestiza, will eventually put an end to violence (102) by overcoming the binary world of patriarchy and facilitating the return of the early earth goddess who balances opposites. This goddess, Coatlicue or Lady of the Serpent Skirt, was suppressed in the early ages of patriarchy by Huitzilopchtli, the Aztec god of war. With her return, a harmony between the body and the spirit will be reinstated and, consequently, war will be overcome by peace.

Castillo concurs. In *Massacre of the Dreamers* the new mestiza bears the name of Xicanista—a conscientized U.S. mestiza. “It is our task as Xicanistas to reinsert the forsaken feminine principle into our consciousness” (12), explains the author. And again: “*Our*

vision as Xicanistas expects peace. [...] But peace is not the opposite of war, peace is the achievement of balance” (*Massacre* 225). Xicanisma, like Anzaldúa’s new consciousness, is therefore

an ever present consciousness of our [Chican@s] dependency specifically rooted in our culture and history. Although Xicanisma is a way to understand ourselves in the world, it may also help others who are not necessarily of Mexican background and/or women. It is yielding, never resistant to change, one based on wholeness not duality. Men are not our opposites, our opponents, our “other.” (226)

Maldonado-Torres argues that “modernity/coloniality is a form of metaphysical catastrophe that naturalizes war” (“Outline,” 11). Carefully hidden from view, the violence against colonized populations can take forms as diverse as discrimination at the work place, constant surveillance, police brutality, imprisonment, rape, torture, killings, racial profiling, intimidation, expropriation, “epistemicide of other ways of knowing” (Alfaisal 47) and epistemic colonization to keep the *damnés* in colonial hell. But Regina is a decolonial philosopher who dares to ask questions and refuses to believe the lies of liberalism and enlightened democracy. She sees through the hypocrisy of power and realizes that the prosperity of the U.S. is built on the naturalization of war against the colonial subject. Hunters dressed up in full regalia, Land Management agents and Border Patrol units policing the border, drug and human traffickers, as well as illegal immigrants are just behind the barbed-wire fence surrounding her house. She both observes the war at close quarters and is affected by it, especially when she grieves the loss of her brother to dishonest coyotes and drug traffickers, Gabo’s to narcosmugglers, her sister-in-law and niece’s to organ harvesters. The panorama of violence against brown bodies is vast.

CHILDREN IN THE ZONE OF DAMNATION

No matter how hard Regina tried to provide Gabo with a safe haven, the boy eventually came into contact with the world of organized crime at the basketball court of a Catholic high school in the small town of Santa Teresa. Situated between El Paso and Cabuche, Santa Teresa is infiltrated by drug dealers. Gabo is appalled by stories of initiation into gang membership, but also intrigued by Los Palominos—as the gang is called—since they offer

protection to its members, like a family. And indeed, the gang plays the role of a family to the dysfunctional individuals who grew up without one: Jesse, who was initiated into the gang when he was eleven; the gang leader, El Toro, who turns out to be a sex offender, a pedophile, and a train robber; or the teen murderer nicknamed Tiny Tears who is also a mother of a drug-addicted baby and Gabo's high school colleague. These and many other neglected and underfed children of maquila workers are forced to learn to survive on the street by joining gangs and mastering shortcuts to the dream of material wealth: an ideal unavailable to those whose only merit is hard, conscientious work. Victims of the colonial matrix of power, they are condemned to live and die in the zone of sub-humanity, the zone of damnation, because they were deemed unsuitable for the modern world long before they turned criminal. Or perhaps the other way around: they turned criminal out of the sense of powerlessness and in response to what they instinctively felt to be a war against the *damnés* like them. In their rebellion against oppressive power structures that kept them down they asserted their agency: if they were to die young, they wanted to die fighting.

"And yet, out of this 'night' (of damnation) continually emerge the possibility of different rays of light and of new and better days," asserts Maldonado-Torres, referring to his hopes for a pluriversal transmodernity to emerge ("Decoloniality at Large" 3). In *The Guardians* hopes for such a world motivate the actions of its major protagonists, especially Regina and Miguel, the new mestiza and the new mestizo. But it is Gabo who—through his unconditional, sacrificial love for the *damnés* (who are so difficult to love)—breaks a path to the world of the you (Fanon, 231-2).

Gabo is a mystic. Already marginalized by his racial and national status, he marginalizes himself further by his extreme, ascetic spirituality. He converses daily with his favorite saint and father substitute, Padre Pio, desires to share in Christ's Cross through the gift of the stigmata, and sees Los Palominos as part of God's mystical body—as sinners in need of being loved and saved. "Even if they do not have mothers and fathers who care," Gabo confides in Padre Pio, "I beseech God y todos los santos that they find a way to forgive themselves" (46). Proclaiming his faith in public places, dressing in a monk's robe to school, receiving the stigmata, and praying for the salvation of gang members, he clearly delinks from the modern ideal of rationality and civilized behavior. Like a true mystic, Gabo prefers to expose himself to ridicule, even lose his

soul rather than abandon the ensnared children of God. As noted by Alexia Schemien, his name links him with the biblical archangel Gabriel, a messenger from God and guardian whose task is to protect lost souls. Thus, despite the risk he incurs by exposing himself to the world of sin and crime, Gabo offers to help his friend Jesse with math, coaches him in basketball, even invites Jesse home for a meal, all the while trying to demonstrate what a real family means. But the person he is especially sympathetic to is Tiny Tears, the scowling girl nobody loves, behind whose thick makeup Gabo senses “a very scary girl” (46).

Yet, Gabo appears to be getting nothing in return. Los Palominos fail Gabo as a substitute family. They betray his trust at the crucial moment when his father’s whereabouts are identified. Likewise, the Church he desires to serve as a Franciscan monk lets him down. The local priest and Gabo’s confessor, Juan Bosco, finds life in celibacy too demanding, plans to marry his long-time mistress to establish a real family. Gabo is shaken by this betrayal; however, true to his name, he remains loyal to those he has been entrusted with, desiring to transform the long night of their damnation into the light of salvation—in both earthly and spiritual sense. As the novel ends, this teenage mystic facilitates Juan Bosco’s conversion and resumption of pastoral duties, finds a loving family for the neglected baby of Tiny Tears, saves the baby’s mother from disaster through sacrificial, decolonial love,¹⁰ and gives his aunt an adopted granddaughter. Although still a minor, Gabo becomes a spiritual father-figure, offering his biblical neighbors a new lease of life—at the cost of his own. His substitution becomes literal. His love for those who ultimately kill him is powerful enough to break through the legacy of colonial violence and stop the violence against the non-white bodies, even if only for a moment. This moment allows a glimpse of another world, a world in which the sub-ontological difference dissolves.

¹⁰ Another celebrated instance of decolonial love is the story of Oscar De León’s death in the cane field in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. For an insightful analysis see Yomaira Figueroa 41-58.

FATHERS IN THE GRIP OF THE COLONIAL MATRIX OF POWER: FROM MACHO TO NEW MESTIZO

Miguel Betancourt is a Chicana activist and history teacher who attempts to decolonize the knowledge he passes on his students. He is the male equivalent of Regina, the queen of the borderland, but as an educated American male and son of military officer, he inhabits the zone of privilege, which makes his struggle against the colonial matrix of power more problematic and his credentials more ambiguous. For one, being born to a man who worked for the notorious School of the Americas, also known as the School of the Assassins, Miguel feels implicated in the crimes committed by the military in the long war of modernity/coloniality. To atone for his father's contribution to it, he intends to rewrite the history of American triumphalism from the underside of modernity and entitle it *The Drug Wars of Latin America: Building Drug Empires*. As an expert in the field, Miguel is quick to make connections. He knows that the School of the Americas "trained more than sixty thousand soldiers and police, mostly from Latin America, in counterinsurgency and combat-related skills since 1946. Its graduates became experts in torture, murder, and political repression" (Castillo, *The Guardians* 32). With time, the skills of the SOA graduates became attractive to Latin American drug lords, who were willing to pay huge amount of money to recruit them.

Betancourt's Chicano consciousness has been stimulated by his training as a historian. More than anyone else, he realizes that the U.S. has created many of the problems Mexico and the whole of South America are struggling with. Although the U.S. has depended on slaves and immigrants to build its power, it still reserves the full benefits of citizenship to Anglos while denying them to minorities, and closes its borders to political and economic refugees from the south. "How long can the United States contain what its counterproductive prohibitions have wrought" (151), wonders Miguel. He realizes that the U.S. demand for narcotics feeds the growth of Mexican crime and the weapons obtained in the U.S. in exchange for drugs make the dirty wars in Mexico even dirtier. Moreover, even with the 24/7 surveillance imposed on borderland areas and augmented after 9/11, the state cannot guarantee security to those who live there. Maintained by U.S. taxpayers' money, the so-called borderland security looks more like a military mobilization: "they have motion sensors, helicopter sweeps and night-vision goggles.

They are better equipped for combat than the boys at war” (124), quips Miguel, exposing the national narrative of border security as a lie, a cover-up of the actual war against subalternized “others.” His political activism is informed by epistemological disobedience.

Highly critical of dividing lines and security fences, Miguel is among those who work for a world without walls, a world valuing life against corporate interests. Even the U.S. economy, as he believes, would be better off without the government’s protectionist policy. Rather than stealing jobs from “true” Americans, immigrants fill in a niche nobody else wants to fill. Besides, Miguel is convinced that the real issue is not about the influx of people as it is about “jobs being snuck out” (125), by which he means the established practice of transferring American assembly plants to the free trade zone of the Mexican side of the border to benefit from the availability of cheaper, unskilled labor. “If the country made it easier for professional immigrants to come in, the competition would possibly drive professional salaries *down*. Thereby equalizing the distribution of wealth” (125), speculates the historian.

The only son of Colonel James Mason III, Miguel grew up with a stern and often absent father, which may account for his emotional inhibitions and the inability to communicate with female partners. Like most American men growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, Miguel relied too much on his macho self (Castillo, *The Guardians* 187); he had problems with showing emotions or even feeling them. In the 1980s, Robert Bly’s *Iron John* was enjoying a cult following in North America. Drawing on Jungian archetypes and ancient folk wisdom expressed in the legend of Iron John, Bly taught men how to reconnect with their feminine side. Miguel briefly experimented with healing his male psyche by joining a group of men chanting, praying, drum beating, and sweating in a sweat lodge—which was an important step toward delinking from western modernity and reconnecting with forgotten pre-modern traditions.

The fact that some men in the therapeutic group admitted to being abusive husbands is illustrative of yet another facet of the colonial paradigm of war: the loss of self-dignity caused by the racist gaze, the impossibility to defend their women from abuse and provide for the family resulted in internalizing the sense of inferiority, to which Chicanos often responded with violence. Venting their rage on women, doubly oppressed and completely defenseless, they could uphold the illusion of being masculine enough to win a fight. According to Anzaldúa, the machismo of modern men “is an

adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem.” Importantly, according to the author of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the modern understanding of the word macho is far from its original meaning: “For men like my father, being ‘macho’ meant being strong enough to protect and support my mother and us, yet being able to show love” (105)

In the context of the gendered violence about to erupt on the Mexican border in the 1990s, Miguel’s story contains another important element of decolonial critique. In western cultures, in which men are expected to be tough and unemotional, weakness and manifestation of feelings are deemed feminine; they must be repressed. From this symbolic violence (against the inner woman), there is only one step to actual violence against actual women, especially women who try to assert their self-worth or are economically more successful than their male partners. This is one possible explanation of both the Juárez femicides and the puzzling fact that the Mexican authorities are surprisingly unable or unwilling to solve the crimes. Most of the murdered, raped, and mutilated women were poor maquiladora workers¹¹ whose growing financial self-reliance threatened the traditional distribution of gender roles in the deeply patriarchal Mexican society formed by the colonial matrix of power.

Miguel’s grandfather, Abuelo Milton, is a good example of a male who has successfully, albeit belatedly, integrated the inner woman. As a young man he used to be a Mexican American macho in the good sense of the word: honest, straightforward, possessed of self-dignity, protective of his family and able to speak truth to power if needs be. Besides, he never drank alcohol and brought his full wages home. When serving in the army, Milton got into a fight with his superior over the U.S. racial oppression of Mexicans and was dishonorably discharged. He tells Regina what happened afterward:

I came back [to El Paso], and since I was never any good at taking orders and needed to be my own boss, I opened up my own business. Right here in downtown El Paso. It was just a cantinita, un lil hole in the wall, you could even say. But I’ll tell you what, it

¹¹ “The maquiladora industry,” writes journalist Andrew Rice, “grew in response to a United States government decision in the 1960s to drastically limit the number of Mexicans crossing the border for seasonal farm work. Mass unemployment followed, and Mexico enticed American manufacturers to new free-trade zones along the border, shielded from United States taxes, unions and wage requirements.”

made me a good lil profit most of my life—between los braceros, las cantineras, and the gringos looking for a good time, my lil bar stayed open every day except Christmas. I even opened on Easter Monday. My old lady never liked that, pero ni modo. She liked that our hijos always had shoes on their feet. She liked that we never went hungry. (73).

Milton had one weakness, one that counted as proof of masculinity in the macho culture of his day, and that was sexual promiscuity. Until the mobilization of Chicana Power in the late 1970s and much beyond that, Mexican women knew they were expected to tolerate their husbands' infidelities as part of their community's cultural makeup. But the older, wiser Milton has grown more vulnerable. Now he has compassion for his late wife,¹² is no longer afraid of showing emotions or engaging in sentimental talk, and, although still appreciative of beautiful women like Regina, he expresses his engagement through compassionate care for her brother and her nephew. This older Milton is not only concerned about his grandson Miguel and his substitute grandson Gabo. In his all-Mexican barrio of Chihuahua he watches daily the colonial matrix of power at work. In parking lots, across churches, near fast food outlets Milton sees day laborers display their muscles to passers-by hoping to find employment and observes Mexican women advertizing their homemaking skills. In Chihuahua drug peddlers, thugs, and immigration officers spread fear, the latter strangely oblivious to the presence of undocumented workers in the chile harvest season; dead bodies are discovered lying in the streets in the mornings; shootouts take place. Milton is genuinely troubled by this display of patriarchal arrogance.

His grandson, Miguel, is another example of a man who has finally managed to integrate the inner woman against the dominant culture's devaluation of the female other. Even though divorced, he still lives next to Crucita and their two children, on the opposite side of the road, and participates in family life; he takes care of the kids when his ex-wife is away working, and spends time with them as a way of keeping up family values. When Crucita is kidnapped and eventually located in a coyotes' den, naked, raped and heavily drugged, Miguel rushes to her help and pledges to pay for her

¹² "My poor wife. She knew it, too. But back then, it was expected of a man to have, well, you know, a life outside his home," says Milton (74).

recovery, exposing a rare compassion for the woman who kept ridiculing him. Although already envisioning a life with Regina, he does not deny his feelings for and obligations to the mother of his children.

Moreover, as Miguel renounced his ties with his father and the world of military might his father represents, he has accepted the financial insecurity that marks, in a more radical fashion, the lives of the condemned. A reasonable person from a world of privilege would try to secure his own life first and think about the needs of others later. But Miguel is a new man, a male equivalent of the new *mestiza*, and another exponent of decolonial love in Castillo's novel. Miguel gives away his father's substantial inheritance, makes regular donations to human rights organizations, has provided in advance for his children's education and signed the house over to them, "just in case I get terminally ill and want to give up my last dime to the Mother Theresa charity" (*The Guardians* 203). Miguel's priorities are clear: in his life others are more important than profit or financial security. His obligation is to all people, but most of all to victims of his country's declared and undeclared wars.

All in all, Miguel has undergone an ontological decolonization and finally freed himself from the legacy of his father's collusion with the military and economic crimes of the U.S. Opting out of the modern/colonial death-world in which he was born, Miguel becomes a figure of reconciliation and works for a world "where many worlds fit," a world where rigid demarcation lines would ultimately collapse. In his opposition to war and his pursuit of a world governed by the ideals of generosity, Miguel is an ideal partner for Regina.

DECOLONIAL LOVE

For the *damné*, as Maldonado-Torres argues in his revision of the Heideggerian *Dasein*, death is a constitutive fact of existence ("On the Coloniality of Being" 251). The non-white bodies, marked as killable, rapeable, and endlessly exploitable, are therefore unprotected or insufficiently protected by law. To them the way to authenticity leads not through encounter with, but an avoidance of death. Eventually, however, rather than authenticity, the goals of the *damné* are decolonization and "des-gener-acción"—the latter signifying action that breaks with the gender oppression instituted and maintained by colonial domination. Decolonization and "des-gener-acción" involve "the aperture of one's self to the racialized

other to the point of substitution,” writes Maldonado-Torres. He clarifies: “[s]ubstitution occurs when one’s identity is teleologically suspended and when one offers one’s life to the task of achieving decolonial justice: that is, a justice oriented to the trans-ontological dimension of the human. [...] Such justice is inspired by a form of love which is also decolonial (“On the Coloniality” 260-61). In other words, decolonial love, a love which makes the humanity of the person of color visible, opposes the paradigm of war and opens the Fanonian “world of the you.”

In the Castillo novel Gabo’s substitution is literal. Desiring to save the girl nobody loves, he eventually gives up his life for hers. Gabo’s prayer has been answered; he has been found worthy of saving this “lost soul” through his identification with the suffering Christ and his own redeeming death. Humanized by the tragedy she has caused, Tiny Tears has a chance to mature and reform her ways.

Regina is devastated by grief, but she overcomes her instinctual drive for revenge and forgives her nephew’s murderer. She hears Gabo speak to her through his favorite passage from St. Matthew’s gospel: “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly father will also forgive you” (216). As a reward, she accepts Gabo’s last gift: the gift of a family. Having lost her nephew, Regina is given a substitute: Tiny Tears’s daughter becomes her adopted granddaughter Gabriela. The logic of the gift has been restored.

When Regina and Junior, her husband-to-be, were kids, they established the Secret Order of the Holy Dove. Before Junior left for Vietnam, he entrusted Regina with the care of “all the innocent creatures” (209). The mature woman recollects as “walking home that day from the chile plant where I worked that year, I pretended all the pajaritos, dogs, cats, horses, roosters—any animals I passed—were in my charge” (208). The innocent creatures in her charge right now are victims of the colonial matrix of power: racism, systemic injustices, greed, and an overall repression of the feminine. These are, first and foremost, the tough but surprisingly fragile Tiny Tears and the fragile Gabriela. Next, although she is confused about her feelings for Miguel, the novel’s ending suggests that they may be reunited, as the Chicano activist has finally come out of the overwhelming shadow of his father and cares for Regina in a special way. Together with the old abuelo, they are a family-in-the-making. United by the lines that divide, they keep constructing a home on the border.

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